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A SENTIMENTAL FREAK SHOW: A DISABILITY STUDIES' READING OF KELLER'S 'THE STORY OF MY LIFE'



Preeti M. Gacche

Department of English,
Aryabhata College, University of Delhi,
New Delhi, India

Presenting Author: preetigacche@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: preetigacche@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The representation of Disability in literature is a ubiquitous phenomenon. The literatures across cultures exploit the idea of disability and disabled characters. However, this representation is often symbolic, metaphorical, as well as reductionist, which does not account for the lived reality of the embodied experience of disability. And hence, these representations continue to maintain the stereotypical views of disability which results in the dehumanizing, marginalization of persons with disability. To counter this reductionist representation of disability, the disability studies scholars and activists are coming up with the idea of

a disability culture which values the first hand experiences of disability by giving voice to the persons with disability. The disability autobiography is one of the crucial aspects of disability culture which imparts agency and the voice to the disabled person, thereby, challenging the unidimensional literary representation of disability. The disability autobiography/disability memoir is in fact the story of Some Body. Helen Keller is popularly celebrated as the icon of fortitude and strength in the face of adversity. Despite her political radicalism, she still remains the miracle poster-child who in spite of her disability manages to graduate and remains

a celebrity throughout her life. In this paper I will attempt to show that Keller's 'the Story of My Life (1903)' despite being a story of a disability experience, continues to be the narrative of overcoming, thereby, sentimentalizing and keeping in place the poster-child image. Apart from being a Some Body memoir, it is also a somebody memoir. I will further argue that the general tone of the memoir is that of gratitude. I will further problematize the idea of agency and

voice by arguing that Keller's memoir is actually a collaborative memoir written by Keller and her teacher together.

KEYWORDS

disability autobiography, disability culture, some-body memoir, narrative of overcoming, poster-child, sentimentalization of disability

